DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 394 155 CS 509 232

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TITLE Losing the Academic Voice and Reaching a Larger Audience.
PUB DATE Nov 95
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (81st, San Antonio, TX, November 18-21, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Awareness; Authors; *Autobiographies; College Faculty; *Creative Writing; *Females; Feminism; Higher Education; Personal Narratives; Publications; *Writing for Publication
IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse; *Personal Writing; *Voice (Rhetoric)

ABSTRACT

Inspired by a writing group that met regularly in North Carolina, Alice Kaplan of Duke University decided to write a memoir at the age of 38. Practiced in the third-person perspective and schooled in a scholarly writing style, Kaplan found it difficult to write first-person narrative. The transition challenged her: she had not realized what an intellectual she had become, estranged from expressing her own emotions. In her four-part memoir, "French Lessons," Kaplan shares many emotional experiences with her readers as she recounts some painful incidents from her childhood and adult life. She succeeds in "breaking the fourth wall" or reaching her audience directly. The dramatic actor's metaphor is doubly appropriate to Kaplan because it is her passion for French that links her to her audience and her research to her teaching. In part 1, she recalls childhood memories; in part 2 her boarding-school years and first contact with French; in part 3 her life as a young scholar; and in part 4 her transition from student to teacher. Another scholar, G. E. Kirsch intereviewed 35 women about their writing preferences and styles. "Women Writing the Academy: Audience, Authority and Transformation" discusses their responses. Kirsch describes the major theme that emerged across the interviews: each respondent wanted to write for a larger audience. (Contains six references.) (TB)

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ED 394 155

Losing the Academic Voice and Reaching a Larger Audience

presented at the

1995 Speech Communication Association Convention

by

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Losing the Academic Voice and Reaching a Larger Audience

Inspired by a writing group that met regularly in North Carolina, Professor Alice Kaplan of Duke University decided to write a memoir at the age of 38. Practiced in the third-person perspective and schooled in a scholarly writing style, Alice found it difficult to write a first-person narrative. The transition challenged Alice, who told Liz McMillen from the Chronicle of Higher Education, "'I didn't realize until I tried to write this book what an intellectual I had become and how unused I was to expressing emotion'" (1994, p. A-8).

Alice persevered, though, and eventually abandoned the objective and detached persona she had adopted when she wrote for refereed journals. She wrote from a more subjective perspective and became involved with her subject matter. Although Alice "lost" her academic voice, her memoir won rave reviews from readers, recognition from the New York Times as one of 1993's notable books, and a nomination for the Book Critic's Circle Award.

A growing number of women scholars are wrestling with and overcoming the same challenges Alice faced when writing French Lessons (McMillen, 1994, February 9). They, like Alice, want to expand their communities (Kirsch, 1993) by writing for non-academic audiences. In the process, they may, as Alice did, expand their knowledge of self. In this paper, I plan to provide a content review of French Lessons and illustrate how Alice connected with herself and with her readers. I will also briefly examine research

that addresses the efforts of other women scholars to reach larger audiences.

In her four-part memoir, Alice shares many emotional experiences with her readers as she recounts some painful incidents from her childhood and adult life. In French Lessons, she succeeds in "breaking the fourth wall" (McMillen, p. A-8) or reaching her audience directly. The dramatic actor's metaphor is doubly appropriate in Alice's case because it is her passion for French that links her to her audience and her research to her teaching.

In the first installment, "Before I Knew French," she recalls childhood memories of the last weeks she and her family spent at their midwestern summer home on Wildhurst Road. In June, seven-year-old Alice celebrated the arrival of summer, her vacation from school, and the beauty of nature. She looked forward to sharing her celebrations with her father, whom she adiored. Her memory of the summer is marred, though, by her father's sudden death. For the first time in her life, Alice experienced an acute sense of loss. She would never have the benefit of her father's understanding, even though she had so many things she wanted to say to him and hear from him.

In Part II, "Getting It," Alice recounts her boarding-school years in Switzerland, the years that provided her first exposure to French. She tells stories about spring break in France, of learning a new language and a new culture. Her vivid and animated style draws readers into her experiences and reminds them of their own joys of discovery.

"Getting It Right," the third part of French Lessons, focuses on Alice's life as a young scholar. Her continued fascination with French during her undergraduate years at Berkeley convinced her to pursue a doctorate at Yale. Alice remembers that the joy of discovery she experienced in her young adult life was accompanied by a seriousness of purpose. Her love of Celine's writings deepened her commitment to the study and teaching of French literature. During every conversation with her friend Andre, she concentrated on improving her fluency and accent. Alice recalls thinking that some people adopt another culture because some elements of their native culture do not "name them" (p. 209). In Part III, Alice advances and personifies her first theory.

In Part IV, Alice tells her readers about the transitions she underwent during her final days as a student and her first days as a teacher. As she reflects on these transitions, she also risks self-revelation. She finds some of her memories shocking, particularly one about Paul deMan, a teacher and scholar she idolized. Although she relied heavily on deMan's works in her dissertation, she ignored the criticism of deMan's contemporaries, who claimed that his views were anti-Semitic. When Alice recalls other events in "Getting It Right," she is startled by her own complacency.

Alice visited Dan, her adviser, shortly after he was denied tenure. She wanted to talk to him, to lift his spirits. She was surprised trhat his wife and son were not at home, she wanted to rtalk to Dan, to lift his spirits.. He told Alice he wanted to

sleep with her. She responded by telling him that he was out of his mind. No other words were exchanged and neither Dan nor Alice mentioned the incident again.

She reminisces about the end of graduate-school days and the beginnings of new careers. Her friend Rachael began teaching comparative literature in California. She and her friend Guy both accepted jobs at state schools. Their jobs, unlike Rachael's, required them to teach first-year French, a prospect they both found dismaying as they anticipated great scholarly achievements. Alice smiles as she anticipates the start of another school year and another section of first-year French. She finds the prospect energizing as she anticipates great teaching achievements.

In "Getting It Right," Alice's thoughts return to deMan, who died in 1984. She wrote an article about him then, in which she discussed his Yale lectures and described his wartime journalism. She praised his scholarly works. She noted that deMan often cautioned his students about confusing theory with life. Alice included deMan's warning in the book because she found it insightful. As she thinks about her published tribute to deMan, Alice is troubled by the recall of another one of his insights. Once, deMan had written that if French Jewish novelists were sent to a Jewish colony, the literary life of Europe would not suffer. Alice chose not to include that insight in the article. Instead, she had safely stored it in her memory.

Alice came to understand that French, her sacred language, had also become her storehouse language, a language that kept her

secrets. By the end of the book, Alice realized that she had kept some of those secrets from herself. A student in one of her classes, Catherine L., helped her make that realization.

Catherine L. translates and explicates a passage from Remise de peire by Patrick Modiano that contains a scene in which a child witnesses a murder. According to Catherine L., Modiano is trying to make the point that children who have not yet learned to speak possess extraordinary observational skills. One day, they will write about the events they have recorded to memory. Recognizing herself as one of those children, Alice takes Catherine L's French lesson to heart.

When the class is over, Alice's thoughts return to the romanticism of France. She must visit France in June, the month that marks the anniversary of her birth and her father's death. In June, "the smells and sounds in the air are too strong at home--the newly cut grass, the fireflies, all the sounds of his death " (p. 208). She looks forward to her visit to France, knowing that it will not help her change the past.

It will help her embrace the future. It will remind her that she has to explain her emotions in a language those closest to her can understand. It will help her communicate with her mother, her brother, and her sister. It will help her better understand her father and the complexities of his brief life, includimg his work at the Nuremberg Trials. It will help her become a better student and teacher of the language that she loves.

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Just as Alice reached a larger audience, so are other women scholars expanding their communities. Women interviewd in by G. E. Kirsch (1993) stated that they were interested in reaching an audience beyond the Academy. Kirsch, an assistant professor who teaches composition theory and women's studies at Wayne State University, interviewed 35 women about their writing preferences and styles. Women Writing the Academy: Audience, authpority, and transformatiomn discusses their responses.

The non-random sample was comprised of 15 faculty members representative of all four faculty ranks as well as the tenured and non-tenured. Kirsch described the 20 students as "lay people" or nontraditional students who worked outside of the Academy. The 35 respondents represented five disciplines. Anthropology, education, history, nursing, and psychology were each represented by 3 faculty members and 4 students.

Each respondent participated in two interviews which involved active collaboration between the interviewer and interviewee, Kirsch then transcribed 590 single-spaced pages, listened to audiotapes, read the manuscript accounts, and compared and identified major thematic topics within and across interviews. Another reader corroborated the theme identification. Kirssh also consulted several participants about the importance they attached to particular themes.

Kirsch identified a major theme that emerged within and across the interviews: Each of the respondents wanted to write for larger audiences. Regardless of the discipline they represented or the

status they held in the university, all of the respondents said they preferred to write and speak in a cooperative, conversational style. The following vignettes illustrate Kirsch's findings.

One faculty members stated that she submitted articles to a popular magazine for teachers. Even though her submissions would probably not help her tenure case, she planned to continue writing for the magazine. The faculty member said that the magazine reached the audience she wanted to reach.

A history professor said that she received about $1500 for each article she wrote for magazines. She told Kirsch that a magazine editor once called her ar work to ask if she would consider writing an article on a subject that held wide popular appeal. After the professor agreed and told her colleagues about the article she planned to write, her colleagues laughed at her.

Another faculty member told Kirsch that she experienced conflict between ambition and doing something useful. Although she knew that she should concentrate on publication in academic journals, she found that focus unfulfilling. She needed to know that her work was meaningful, that it would make a positive contribution to an individual, a group, or a society.

Kirsch's work in Women Writing the Academy is substantiated by Blair, Brown, & Baxter (1994), Gilligan (1982), and Tokarcyk & Fay (1993). Each of the authors emphasizes the ways in which gender differences affect communication styles. Gender differences explain why some women scholars want to lose the academic voice. The women Kirsch interviewed described the current, dominant

academic voice as competitive and antagonistic. As Kirsch noted, although women scholars are willing to engage in argumentative discourse. they do not endors adversarial communication.

As Blair, Brown, and Baxter (1994) pointed out, academic writing now rewards "single, isolated 'scholarly turns'" (p. 403) instead of "extended, interactive scholarly conversations" (p. 403). The authors cited here have begun that conversation by voicing their commitment to their principles. The strength of those principles and the support of other women scholars will keep the conversation going.

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